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Expressive Disclosure Following an Interpersonal Conflict: Can Merely Writing About an Interpersonal Offense Motivate Forgiveness?

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ABSTRACT - The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of writing as an essential component for expediting the forgiveness process. Forty undergraduate students were randomly assigned to either write about an interpersonal conflict or about trivial topics. Both groups underwent pretests and posttests measuring positive and negative affect (Positive and Negative Affect Scale), forgiveness (Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory), and rumination (Impact of Events Scale). Both groups experienced significant increases in positive affect and decreases in negative affect and rumination. Only the group writing about an interpersonal conflict, however, reported significant improvements in the way they thought and felt about the topic. The results show that the effect of writing on forgiveness lends itself to further study.

Keywords:

Forgiveness; Expressive writing; Emotional processing; Affective change; Interpersonal conflict; Experimental design

Introduction

Interpersonal conflicts are an inevitable human experience. For many, these interactions involve being wronged or offended in some manner, such as a partner being unfaithful, or being assaulted. Psychological distress arising from interpersonal relationships has linked to psychopathology (e.g., Sullivan, 1938). Thus, relationship problems and interpersonal hurts are frequently cited by clients as an important motivating

ISSN:
1541-745X (Print)
2169-3951 (Online)

Editor's note: This article is a reprint of an original work published in 2005 in *Counseling and Clinical Psychology Journal*, Vol. 2(1), pp. 2-14.

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factor in deciding whether or not to seek professional help (McCullough & Worthington, 1994; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Promotion of forgiveness has recently emerged as an area of great interest to researchers and clinicians as a means of coping with interpersonal conflict (see Diblasio & Proctor, 1993; McCullough et al., 2000; Stein, 2001). Identifying, expressing, and changing negative thoughts and feelings (particularly those directed at the offender) is a common theme in forgiveness.

While many therapeutic models of forgiveness encourage oral expression of thoughts and feelings, other strategies incorporate writing and journaling as well as traditional therapy (Bryant, 1999; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Worthington et al., 2000). Most studies in this area incorporate writing letters to an offender as part of a comprehensive treatment package that includes individual or group therapy, videotapes, and/or didactic seminars (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Bryant, 1999; Worthington, et al., 2000). Whether writing down one's thoughts and feelings about the interpersonal trauma is an effective treatment for promoting forgiveness has yet to be examined.

In a recent meta-analysis, writing interventions which fostered self-disclosure following trauma were considered central to promoting physical and psychological health (Smyth, 1998). The utility of therapeutic writing has been demonstrated in a number of studies of male and female clients of different ages, ethnicities, and personality types (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999); from prison inmates (Richards et al., 2000), to college students (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996), to unemployed professionals (Spera et al., 1994). While the theoretical explanations for the benefits vary, the cognitive changes that writing produces are a common theme (Bootzin, 1997; Pennebaker 1997; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Translating thoughts and feelings about a traumatic event into a narrative may change one's cognitions about the event as well as one's coping skills. Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) suggest that forming a narrative promotes an increased understanding of a traumatic event so that it becomes more psychologically manageable. If a writer's narratives become more organized over time, it is associated with decreases in the number of intrusive thoughts which accompany the trauma (Davidson et al., 2002; Klein, 2002). The types of words and word frequencies in a narrative predict success in writing therapy (Pennebaker, 1991). For example, writers who use numerous positive- emotionally laden words (e.g., laugh), a moderate number of negative- emotionally laden words (e.g., angry), and increase their use of causal and insight words (e.g., realize) over time experienced improved health (Pennebaker, 1991; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Pennebaker et al., 1997; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). On the other hand, writers choosing a large or small number of negative-emotion words showed little or no improvement.

The cognitive changes that occur in writing therapy seem similar to those in the forgiveness process. For example, forgiving is more likely when victims alter their interpretation of the offense and the offender (Enright et al., 1992). This is consistent with attribution retraining models that focus on changing the appraisal of the event to cope with the resulting negative affect (Al-Mabuk, Dedrick, & Vanderah, 1998; Takaku, 2001). Several studies have demonstrated that as a writer's journal entries change, cognitive shifts regarding the traumatic event (e.g., discovering different meanings, developing a clearer understanding of the event) are likely to occur (Bootzin, 1997; Pennebaker 1997; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Both forgiveness and writing therapy view rumination as instrumental to cognitive change. Rumination involves intrusive thoughts about a distressing event, which are linked to negative emotions. A victim who ruminates about the offense and holds hostile, vengeful thoughts toward his or her offender is likely to be unforgiving (Worthington et al., 2001). On the other hand, people who forgive over time are more likely to reduce their ruminations (McCullough et al., 2001). Before they can overcome their tendency to ruminate victims may need to communicate their thoughts and feelings about the trauma; otherwise, therapeutic forgiveness may be ineffective (McCullough, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 1998). This is akin to finding that writing therapy reduces ruminations by providing a mechanism of disclosure (Bootzin, 1997; Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker and O'Heeron, 1984). This avenue of

coping with interpersonal traumas may be especially important for victims who prefer not to discuss painful events with others but prefer to disclose their thoughts and feelings privately.

The practical and theoretical ties between writing therapy and forgiveness suggest that merely writing about thoughts and feelings related to an interpersonal offense promotes decreased rumination and increased forgiveness. While not affecting rumination and avoidance, Lepore and Greenberg (2002) recently showed a trend between expressive writing subsequent to a romantic breakup and re-uniting with an ex-partner. The purpose of this study was to examine whether writing about an interpersonal trauma encourages forgiveness. Specifically, we hypothesized that writing about an interpersonal conflict will increase positive affect and decrease negative affect, reduce rumination, and increase forgiveness by decreasing an offende's avoidance the offender and their desire to seek revenge. We also predicted that writing about an offense improves the injured party's perceptions about the event.

Method

Participants

Forty participants (8 men and 32 women) were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at a moderately sized regional university in the south United States. Eligibility for the study was limited to participants who met the following criteria: Subjects must (1) have experienced an interpersonal offense (e.g., unfaithfulness of a partner, betrayal by someone close, or parental divorce) that continued to caused significant stress, (2) not have received professional counseling, and (3) be willing to participate in three consecutive writing sessions. Of the participants, 72.5% were Caucasian, 22.5% were African American, 2.5% were Hispanic or Latino, and 2.5% were from other ethnic backgrounds. Subjects ages ranged from 17 to 38 ($M = 21.97$, $SD = 4.91$). A total of 10% were freshmen, 40% were sophomores, 25% were juniors, and 25% were seniors. Participants who volunteered for the study were given extra course credit.

Instruments

Demographic Survey. Participants completed a demographic survey, which included questions concerning the offense (e.g., time since offense, extent of hurt at the time) and whether they had discussed the offense with a friend and/or professional.

Impact of Events Scale (IES). The IES (Horowitz et al., 1979) is a 15-item self-report measure scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale contains questions that measure intrusive thoughts, or rumination, and avoidance. Both the intrusion and avoidance scales have displayed acceptable reliability (alpha of .79 and .82, respectively), and a split-half reliability for the whole scale of .86 (Horowitz et al., 1979). The internal consistency reliability and construct validity of the IES scales has also been demonstrated in forgiveness research (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 2001, Largo-Marsh & Spates, 2002; Park & Blumberg, 2002). The participants rated each item based on the amount of distress caused by a self-identified interpersonal offense. For the purposes of this study, only the intrusive subscale (a measure of rumination) was used.

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). The PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) is a 20-item self-report measure of the extent that respondents experience positive (i.e., joy, excitement) and negative affect (i.e., anger, fear, disgust). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale to reflect the degree to which respondents are experiencing a particular mood. The developers of the PANAS reported internal consistency in acceptable ranges for both the Positive (PA) and Negative Affect (NA) scales (i.e., PA = .86 to .90; NA = .84 to .87). The NA scale is positively correlated with other measures of negative affect such as the Beck Depression Inventory, the Hopkins Symptom Checklist, and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory State Anxiety Scale (.74, .58, and .51). The PA scale is negatively correlated with these same measures (-.19, -.36, and -.35). The PANAS has been used in previous studies to measure levels of positive and negative

affect following writing interventions (Batten et al., 2002; Kloss & Lisman, 2002). In the current study, the PANAS was used to assess participant moods before the first and after the last writing session.

Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM). The TRIM (McCullough et al., 1998) is a 12-item self-report measure of a respondent's level of motivation to forgive an offender. The TRIM contains two subscales, Revenge and Avoidance, with internal consistency estimates ranging from .85 to .93. The subscales have moderate convergent validity coefficients with measures of offense-specific ruminations and low discriminate validity coefficients with measures of social desirability. Participants completed the TRIM prior to and following the final writing sessions. The TRIM scores were used to evaluate changes in participant forgiveness as a result of writing. Internal reliability estimates for the total scores were acceptable and pre and posttest, Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$.

Perceived Change. Two single item measures also adapted from Pennebaker and Beall (1986) were used to evaluate the extent that participants' attributed any positive changes in their thoughts and feelings to the writing process. Subjects completed the items at the end of the three-day writing session by indicating their responses on a 5-point Likert scale.

Manipulation Check Items. The manipulation check items (adapted from Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) consisted of two single items on a 5-point Likert scale which evaluated how "personal" subjects felt their writing was, and the extent to which subjects felt they were revealing their emotions. Subjects completed the manipulation check items at the end of the third writing session.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes. Participants signed their names to schedule three appointments and were asked to report to the psychology department counseling training clinic. Appointments were scheduled for three consecutive days. Participants were randomly assigned to either a Writing-Trauma (experimental) or Writing-Trivial (control) group. For each appointment, the writing-trauma (trauma) group was instructed to write about a specific interpersonal offense that occurred at some point in their life. They were directed then to write about their deepest feelings as related to the offense. The writing-trivial (trivial) group wrote about a different trivial topic at each appointment. More specifically, at the first appointment the trivial group was instructed to write about what they did from the time they woke up until the time they arrived at the clinic, at the second appointment about what they planned on doing from the time they left the clinic until they went to bed, and at the third session about what they planned to do over the next week.

Upon arrival for the first writing session, participants were escorted to a counseling room. They completed consent forms, the demographic survey, and the JES, PANAS, and the TRIM. Next, they were given a research packet that included writing instructions for the day, loose leaf paper, pencils, and an ink pen. Each participant was left alone for 20 minutes to write on the assigned topic. After the allotted time, each participant was instructed to stop writing and to place their composition in a sealed manila envelope coded for session number and group. The participant followed the same procedure for sessions two and three, but during the latter sessions subjects only completed the JES, PANAS, and the TRIM. After the third writing session, participants completed the Perceived Change and manipulation check items. Participants were debriefed individually, and members in the control group were given an opportunity to complete the writing intervention. None of the control group participants opted to write about their trauma.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The experimental and control groups did not differ significantly in terms of ethnicity, $\chi^2 (1, N = 40) = 0.13, p > .05$, academic classification, $\chi^2 (1, N = 40) = .40, p > .05$, gender, Fisher's Exact Test, $p > .05$, or age, $F (1, 38) = 1.28, p > .05$. The groups did not differ on offense-related variables. To identify relevant

experimental and control group differences in the types of reported offenses, offenses were separated into three categories: (1) unfaithful partner or abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional) by a partner/friend/family member, (2) abandonment by a partner/friend/family member, (3) dishonesty of a partner/friend/family member or other. A chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences between groups on the nature of the offense, $\chi^2(2, N = 40) = 2.69, p > .05$. Groups were also similar with respect to whether or not they received counseling, Fisher's Exact Test, $p > .05$, extent of hurt at the time of the offense, $F(1, 38) = 4.04, p > .05$, how recent was the offense, $F(1, 38) = 0.13, p > .05$, and the extent to which the offense continued to affect them, $F(1, 38) = 0.52, p > .05$.

Manipulation of the independent variable was successful. Compared to the control group who wrote about trivial topics, experimental participants who wrote about a specific interpersonal offense reported that their essays were significantly more personal, $F(1, 38) = 42.81, p < .05$, and significantly more emotionally revealing, $F(1, 38) = 123.91, p < .05$.

While groups did not differ on demographic or offense-related variables, significant individual differences were found in the extent to which participants forgave their offenders. The correlations between group and pretest scores revealed a significant correlation between group and pretest TRIM scores, $r = .45, p < .01$. Despite random assignment, participants in the trauma writing group were less motivated to forgive their offenders, as measured by their total score on the TRIM, $F(1, 38) = 9.75, p < .05$. To control these differences, the pretest forgiveness scores were used as covariates in further analysis of group differences on the posttest TRIM.

Test of Hypotheses

Three separate statistical analyses were used to examine whether or not writing changed a participants' motivation to forgive, their self-perceived thoughts and feelings, and their level of rumination. First, a repeated measures MANOVA compared pretest and posttest scores on positive affect, negative affect, and rumination. Second, a MANCOVA examined the effects of writing on posttest TRIM scores after controlling for individual differences in forgiveness motivation prior to being assigned to the intervention or comparison group. Third, a MANOVA examined the effects writing has on participants' perceived change in affect and thoughts about the offense. Means and standard deviations of study variables by group membership are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations on Forgiveness Motivation and Affect Across Time by Group

Variables	Treatment Group				Control Group			
	Time 1		Time 2		Time 1		Time 2	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Rumination	13.24	4.76	12.43	4.54	13.86	4.62	9.68	5.36
Avoidance	20.25	7.97	19.05	9.49	27.85	6.49	28.60	7.52
Revenge	10.20	5.78	7.95	5.05	13.95	4.57	10.90	4.92
Positive Affect	22.30	8.12	26.40	9.42	23.05	9.57	29.10	10.65
Negative Affect	23.10	7.00	17.85	7.56	23.05	7.51	15.55	5.62

Positive Affect, Negative Affect, and Rumination. The first hypothesis that writing about an unresolved interpersonal conflict would increase positive affect, decrease negative affect, and reduce the amount of offense-related rumination was not supported. A 2 (Group: interpersonal offense vs: trivial topic) X 2 (Time: pretest, posttest) repeated measures MANOVA was performed on positive affect scores, negative affect scores, and rumination scores. The multivariate main effect of group, multivariate $F(1, 38) = 0.80, p > .05$, was not significant; nor was the multivariate interaction between group and time, multivariate $F(1, 38) = 1.11, p > .05$. A significant multivariate main effect for time, multivariate $F(1, 38) = 8.80, p < .05$,

occurred. Writing, even about trivial events, affected thoughts and feelings. Post-hoc univariate ANOVA's revealed significant improvements in positive affect, univariate $F(1, 38) = 8.80, p < .05$, significant decreases in negative affect, univariate $F(1, 38) = 23.79, p < .05$, and significant reductions in rumination, univariate $F(1, 38) = 6.79, p < .05$.

Forgiveness. The second hypothesis was that writing improves an offender's motivation to seek forgiveness. After controlling for individual differences in forgiveness motivation on pretest TRIM scores, no significant differences were found between groups at pretest, multivariate $F(1, 38) = 0.86, p > .05$.

Perceived Change Items. The third hypothesis concerning the effects of writing about an interpersonal offense on self-perceived changes in thoughts and feelings about the offense was supported. A multivariate analysis revealed a significant difference between groups, $F(1, 38) = 5.83, p < .05$. Post-hoc univariate ANOVA's revealed significant group differences in how participants thought, $F(1, 38) = 8.96, p < .05$, and felt about the offense, $F(1, 38) = 11.63, p < .05$. Writing about an interpersonal offense changed the writer's thoughts and feelings about that offense.

Discussion

In the current study, when differences in forgiveness motivation were controlled, writing about a specific hurtful offense or a trivial topic was not related to changes in objective measures of forgiveness motivation, rumination, or affect. Outcome studies have generally found that expressive writing participants improve more than controls (Pennebaker, 1993; Smyth, 1988). While significant differences between groups were not found on objective measures, a subjective measure indicated that only the expressive writing group believed that writing about the interpersonal conflict positively changed their offense-related thoughts and feelings. Perhaps the forgiveness measure (i.e. TRIM) we chose was not sensitive enough to detect subtle increases motivation to forgive secondary to writing.

Demonstrating the therapeutic effects of writing has been difficult for others as well. For example, Walker et al. (1999) found no significant group differences in moods or intrusive thoughts in women with breast cancer assigned to either an expressive writing or attention-only group. Positive changes in mood states were, however, observed in college students who wrote about their negative body image or a trivial topic (e.g., Compass et al., 1999). Beneficial changes in thoughts and feelings toward a partner following a romantic breakup have also been found to be independent of the writing topic (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). Along with these prior findings, the current study raises questions about the benefits of using expressive writing to significantly change negative thoughts and feelings.

The effects of writing are more robust for physical as opposed to psychological outcomes (Pennebaker, 1989; Smyth, 1998), which may explain why both groups in the current study reported an increase in positive affect, a decrease in negative affect, and a reduction in rumination. Writing about a topic unrelated to the interpersonal offense, may have distracted the trivial group from thinking about the offense, which then led to changes in rumination and affect. The expressive writing participants may have focused more attention on the positive aspects of the traumatic event, thus preventing the short-term distress typically observed (Lepore & Smyth, 2002). Writing that highlights the negative aspects, as opposed to only positive features, of an interpersonal trauma may what is most important to produce significant change on non-physiological measures of affect and cognition.

Many factors could account for the unexpected findings, although three limitations within the current study are most salient. First, the experimental group's writing instructions might have been overly general. For example, instructions did not control for type (i.e., assault, infidelity), intensity (i.e., severity of hurt), or time since the offense (i.e., past vs. ongoing), which other forgiveness-related studies have considered (McCullough et al., 1997). Writing about more recent traumas, as opposed to remote events, produces greater changes than writing about past traumas (Smyth, 1988). Experimental group instructions also failed to specify which aspects of the conflict the writer should focus on (e.g. positive, negative aspects, or both);

this lack of specificity is significant since recent findings indicate that focusing on positive aspects of a trauma will eliminate short-term distress (Lepore & Smyth, 2002). Using more specific instructions does not, however, guarantee differences between writing and control groups. Earnhardt, Martz, Ballard, and Curtin (2002), for example, found limited writing effects even when standardized imagery was used to evoke specific content involving maladaptive body image. Whether imagery focused writers on issues of body image or dorm room objects, no significant changes were found in objective measures of body image, eating behaviors, or moods. Participants also showed no differences on self-reported changes in thoughts and feelings related to body image.

A second limitation involves individual differences related to writing outcomes. The effects of expressive writing seem to be partly a function of individual differences, such as repressive personality (Lumley, Tojek, & Macklem, 2002), self-regulation (Lepore et al., 2002), and emotional avoidance (Stanton & Danoff-Burg, 2002). In a meta-analysis of therapeutic writing, Smyth (1998) identified significant gender effects showing that males benefited more than females. The fact that females far outnumbered males in the current study may have minimized any post-manipulation group differences.

The lack of group differences might be the result of the relative speed with which the data was collected. Writing interventions have produced several positive outcomes at one-month post-writing, which may be due to an increased short-term distress immediately after the final writing session (Pennebaker, 1993; Smyth, 1998). Immediately following the final writing session, participants in the therapeutic writing group continued to report higher levels of rumination, while the trivial writers showed declining levels of rumination. It is possible that the experimental group would eventually experience significant changes in forgiveness over a one-month period as levels of intrusive thoughts declined.

In addition, participants may not have been given sufficient time to begin the forgiving process (Worthington et al., 2000). Smyth (1998) noted that the longer the writing intervention lasted the larger the treatment effect. Moreover, the benefits of writing tend to persist and grow stronger over time (Lange, et al., 2002). Sessions occurred over three consecutive days, not the weeks or months used in the designs of other studies. Perhaps, the improvements in positive affect and rumination in the treatment group would have continued with time, while changes in the trivial group would have reached a plateau. Future researchers are encouraged to increase the time span of the intervention and include a follow-up.

The results demonstrate that the interaction between cognitive processing and expressive writing interventions to promote social adjustment (e.g., restoring broken relationships, promoting forgiveness) requires further study. In addition to the above suggestions, future research might also include specific writing instructions to manipulate theoretical variables outlined by the forgiveness motivation model. McCullough and Worthington's (1995) model of empathy-based forgiveness identifies empathizing with the offender as a necessary step in the forgiveness process. The writing instructions may need to focus the writing in such a way that promotes empathy. For example, instructions might ask the writer to describe a time that they did hurt someone. In doing so, the individual may come to understand the offender's position. Structuring writing sessions according to a theoretical forgiveness model may lead to more significant changes in forgiveness outcomes.

With the literature on writing interventions expanding so rapidly, it is vital to examine ways in which they can be applied clinically. A focus on writing intervention in treatment offers many advantages. The length of treatment in traditional forgiveness interventions may be shortened considerably, and shortening therapy may encourage more clients to enter and remain in treatment. Expressive writing may provide treatment for clients who are not yet ready to even discuss a hurtful, traumatic event with a therapist. Thus, the client may benefit from writing even before the therapeutic relationship has been well established. It may also provide clients with a way to share more details than would normally be possible in a therapy session. All of these factors may make writing therapy more effective than the traditional forgiveness

methods if writing intervention is shown to be an effective clinical tool; if writing therapy is indeed effective, the possibilities for future applications are enormous.

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